

If it Looks Like a Landmine, Smells like a Landmine...

By Scott Stedjan and Matt Schaaf | August 28, 2006

Would a bomb by another name be any less explosive? Would a landmine by another name be less pernicious?

For the first time in nearly a decade, the Bush administration plans to begin production of a new generation of antipersonnel mines. Seeking to avoid the images of soldiers in wheelchairs and dismembered children associated with landmines, the administration has renamed these particular landmines “networked munitions systems.” Wrapping landmines in a new name—removing the stigma they deserve—makes selling them to Congress and the public easier. Still, these networked munitions systems are nothing but high-tech landmines, and carry the same abhorrent side effects they always have.

Fortunately Congress is not that easily fooled. On August 1, Senators Patrick Leahy (VT) and Arlen Specter (PA) introduced the bipartisan Victim-Activated Landmine Abolition Act of 2006. The bill prohibits the procurement of any victim-activated weapon, whether called a landmine or something else.

The move to re-start production of victim-activated landmines represents a departure from previous U.S. practice and policy in this area. During the 1990s, U.S. landmine policy was constantly evolving, but was heading in the direction of a total ban. Unfortunately, when a global treaty comprehensively banning antipersonnel landmines was signed by 122 governments in December 1997, the U.S. was conspicuously absent. The Treaty now counts 154 States Parties, including all of the U.S.’s NATO allies.

While refusing to sign the Mine Ban Treaty immediately, the Clinton administration, under pressure from legislators and the global mine ban movement to stop the indiscriminate and accidental killing of civilians by landmines, began researching alternatives. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been

spent over the last 20 years developing such alternatives. At the same time, exhibiting commendable restraint, the U.S. has not used new landmines since the first Gulf War in 1991, has not exported mines since 1992, and has not produced them since 1997.

According to budget documents sent to Congress outlining the next five budget years, the Pentagon is requesting \$688 million for research on and \$1.08 billion for the production of “alternatives to antipersonnel mines.” But rather than developing alternatives to landmines, the Pentagon this year awarded a contract for initial production of high-tech weapons that are remarkably similar to conventional victim-activated landmines.

The Pentagon has used these funds to develop what is called “man-in-the-loop” technology for new landmines, now called networked munitions systems. By putting the decision to detonate the weapon in the hands of a conscious human, this technology was designed to make landmines more discriminate. Unlike conventional antipersonnel mines that detonate by being picked up, stepped on, or otherwise moved by a victim, this technolo-



gy would limit the indiscriminate effects of mines by giving a soldier the ability to decide when to detonate a mine. Once a tripwire is touched by a potential victim, a soldier, possibly stationed miles away, is alerted and then makes the decision whether to activate the weapon. If new landmines were only able to detonate through this intentional action of a human, and the technology was proven to accurately identify targets, they most likely would be considered legal under the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and comply with new Leahy-Specter legislation.

But the new Pentagon weapon system can also operate “autonomously,” that is, like a landmine.

Once a soldier flips a switch, the weapon becomes a conventional victim-activated antipersonnel mine that cannot tell the difference between the boot of a soldier and the foot of a child. After spending hundreds of millions of dollars researching alternatives to antipersonnel mines, the administration has instead produced another conventional landmine with a switch. Turn the switch one way for command detonation and the other way for victim-detonation. Whether the administration calls them landmines or not, this new indiscriminate weapon will seriously threaten the lives and livelihoods of civilians and soldiers wherever they are deployed.

Traditional victim-activated landmines are considered indiscriminate because they are unable to distinguish between non-combatant and combatant. International Humanitarian Law requires that in war, a distinction must be made between civilians and military personnel and that all feasible measures be taken to protect civilians from the weapons of war. With these firmly established norms in

mind, Congress has consistently funded the landmine alternatives program expressly to find alternatives to indiscriminate victim-activated landmines. The Pentagon has curiously turned this imperative on its head; they have used funds Congress has appropriated for finding alternatives to indiscriminate landmines to design another weapon capable of being operated indiscriminately. International law and morality compel countries to design weapons to the greatest extent possible to distinguish between soldiers and civilians. This new weapon fails that standard.

The resumption of landmine production would moreover further corrode the U.S.’ global reputation. More than two-thirds of the world’s nations, including most key U.S. military allies, have completely banned these indiscriminate weapons. But the current administration continues to insist they have no intention of ever joining the Mine Ban Treaty. By failing to join the majority of the world’s nations

More than two-thirds of the world’s nations, including most key U.S. military allies, have completely banned landmines.

in banning landmines, the administration’s actions alienate U.S. allies and provide cover for other countries that continue to make and use these abhorrent weapons. These countries, like Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Georgia and Russia have unscrupulously used landmines to block refugees from fleeing oppression, terrorize civilians and illegally annex sovereign territory. If the world’s sole superpower believes it needs these weapons, why should others countries think they do not? As long as the U.S. reserves the right to use and produce weapons that can be activated by unsuspecting victims, other nations with little concern for human rights will continue to use them as well.

Since the Bush administration is firmly opposed to banning landmines, Congress should take a leader-

ship role on this issue. Senators Leahy and Specter took the first step by introducing this essential legislation. It is time for other members to join with them and demand that the U.S. not produce new indiscriminate weapons.

Scott Stedjan is the National Coordinator of the United States Campaign to Ban Landmines and works on arms control and conflict prevention for the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL). Matt Schaaf is a Legislative Program Assistant for FCNL.

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit www.fpiif.org.

Recommended citation:

Scott Stedjan and Matt Schaaf, “If it Looks Like a Landmine, Smells like a Landmine...”, (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 28, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpifxt/3468>

Production Information:

Writer: Scott Stedjan and Matt Schaaf

Editor: Miriam Pemberton, IPS

Layout: Erik Leaver, IPS

p. 4

www.fpiif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

